

HENRIK IBSEN'S DR STOCKMANN AND JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU'S *GENERAL WILL*

Fatma Dore

Afyon Kocatepe University, Turkey

Abstract

This work examines the concept of the general will developed by the 18th-century Swiss-French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau through Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play *An Enemy of the People*. It reveals that the formulation of the concept of the general will comes about through Rousseau's attempt, as part of the economic or social contract tradition, to solve the problem of the relation of freedom to society. It then looks at the difference between the general will and the will of all, an agglomeration of the will of each individual, and reveals that the general will is manifested in concrete terms through legislative action, which allows for it to be regarded as the manifestation of a community's concern for its common interest. This work demonstrates that Ibsen's play is suitable for an analysis of the general will, as it takes place in a town that is a *de facto* free city-state. It then reveals that the attempt in the drama to silence Stockmann's revelation of the polluted waters in the town's municipal Baths is a manifestation of the general will. As such, this work shows that the general will is problematic as regards the issues of morality and freedom. It also shows that polities run by the general will may have external instability, and that the general will is an obstacle to the discovery of new truths.

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Introduction

In 1882, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, the man “generally regarded as the father of modern theatre” (Taylor, 1968: 131), published the play *An Enemy of the People* (Watts, 1964: 294), which was staged in the subsequent year in Oslo (Taylor, 1968: 91). The play was “propelled by his fury over the hostile reception tendered to *Ghosts*” (Brustein, 1991: 67), a play that Ibsen had put out the previous year. Although *Ghosts* is an “intensely moral play” (Watts, 1964: 12), it was viciously condemned by the critics at the time due to its treatment of the subject of syphilis^{*}. This “hostile reception” (Brustein, 1991: 67) caused Ibsen great distress (Watts, 1964: 12), and *An Enemy of the People* is Ibsen's response to it. For the beginning of *An Enemy of the People*, this aim of Ibsen's is not^{**} immediately apparent, with the plot initially proceeding in a way that is not at all untypical of progressive writing of the time. The town is soon seen to be run by an oligarchic elite equally contemptuous of the people and of scientific fact. These “pillars of the community” are shown to be morally bankrupt and devoid of a community spirit, being motivated instead by a narrow class identity. The issue at stake is the municipal

^{*} Ibsen's supporter, the Anglo-Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw quotes from some of the criticism of *Ghosts* published in the United Kingdom, such as that in *Daily Telegraph* calling it a “positively abominable play” and “[a]n open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged” (qtd. in Shaw, 1891: 89), and that in *The Gentlewoman* describing it as “a wicked nightmare” (qtd. in Shaw, 1891: 90).

^{**} *The Pillars of the Community* is the title of an earlier Ibsen play dealing with societal hypocrisy, published in 1877.

Baths which their Medical Officer Dr Stockmann has, in a report he intends to have printed, proven to contain polluted waters that sicken rather than foster the health of its out-of-town visitors. However, the progressive paradigm is broken in the third act, when the mayor explains to the representatives of the majority how their constituency will also suffer should Stockmann's report be put into print. The play then proceeds with the attempted silencing of Dr Stockmann by the town as a whole, and Dr Stockmann's realization that it is the majority and radical journalism and not the traditional elite which is the real enemy of truth.

As such, in a review for *The Guardian* newspaper of a 2013 London production of the play, the esteemed theatre critic Michael Billington writes that the drama contains "a difficult moment for a modern audience" when the hero of the drama Dr Stockman changes from a "crusading reformer" to "an intellectual aristocrat" for coming to regard truth as a preserve of the minority, not the majority. Billington clearly feels that such an outlook has no relevance for our egalitarian democratic societies of today, and ends his piece with the remark that, in order to provide it with some, "one would have to trim Stockmann's rhetoric and totally rewrite Ibsen's plot for the modern world" (Billington, 2013). With his remarks, Billington reveals the hardwired bias that underlies the democratic societies of today, an idea that the eighteenth-century Swiss-French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau contributed a great deal to. This is the idea that the majority and right are interconnected, and this was expressed by Rousseau in his concept of "the general will".

This work will examine the concept of the general will through Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and by doing so reveal four specific problems with this concept of Rousseau's. These problems concern definitions of morality and freedom, as well as the question of the relation of polities run by the general will with each other. This work will also examine the relation of the general will to the discovery of new truths. Before commencing upon these aims, the work will first reveal how the concept of the general will is developed by Rousseau to solve the problem of freedom within society. It will then look at what the general will is and how it can be identified. Next, it will show why *An Enemy of the People* is a suitable work for an examination of the general will, and then demonstrate that the general will is expressed in the drama through the attempted silencing of Dr Stockmann.

The Problem of Freedom and Society Resolved by the General Will

The general will itself is a central concept in Rousseau's overall political philosophy (Copleston, 2003: 74; Russell, 2004: 634)^{***}, which itself belongs to what has been called "the *economic or social contract tradition*" (Pinker, 2002: 285). Within this tradition "[s]ociety emerges when people agree to sacrifice some of their autonomy in exchange for security from the depredations of other wielding *their* autonomy" (Ibid). Thus, it is a tradition in which a balance is found between state authority – which provides security for its members – and individual freedom. Obviously, the greater the power of the state, the less freedom the individual has, and *vice-versa*. One theorist who stands on the side of almost absolute state power is Thomas Hobbes, whereas on the other side, Thomas Jefferson is a theorist who attempts to preserve as much human freedom as is compatible with a functioning society. To make human freedom an absolute would be to dissolve all political bonds, and would entail anarchy. For those who value human freedom, yet are wary of anarchism, the formula of the John Stuart Mill seems to perfectly set out the

^{***} Mark Hulliung exclaims that "[p]erhaps no concept is more strongly attached to Rousseau's reputation as a social and political thinker than that of the 'general will'" (2001: 70).

borderline between state power and human freedom. Mill avers that “the sole end for which mankind are warranted...in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection” (1996: 13); that is “to prevent harm to others.” He restates the same point with his assertion that “[t]he only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it” (1996: 16). In other words, for Mill, the state is only able to hinder a person's freedom of action when that action threatens to harm other members of the state.

Into this debate, Rousseau takes a original approach. He would be unable to accept Mill's formula as freedom cannot be limited for him in any way. Rousseau avers (1998: 6) that “all [are] born free and equal”, and regards freedom as being intrinsic to the human being. Rousseau also states (1998: 10) that all “are born free men; their liberty belongs to them, and no one has the right to dispose of it except themselves.” Thus, as Copleston notes (2003: 92), striking a balance between freedom and authority “was not, however, to the taste of Rousseau. He wishes to show that apparent curtailment of liberty is not really a curtailment at all.” Rousseau also sees an intimate connection between morality and freedom. He avers that “[t]o renounce one's liberty is to renounce one's quality as a man, the rights and also the duties of humanity...Such a renunciation is incompatible with man's nature, for to take away all freedom from his will is to take away all morality from his actions” (1998: 10). Nevertheless, Rousseau also believes, at least for contemporary times, that a state is necessary. ****

To resolve this problem, Rousseau claims to remove the dichotomy between the two concepts. That is he believes he has found a way in which state power and absolute freedom of the individual are both assured. In order to reach his solution, Rousseau first sets out what he calls this “fundamental problem” as:

To find a form of association which may defend and protect with the whole force of the community the person and property of every associate, and by means of which each, coalescing with all, may nevertheless obey only himself, and remain as free as before (Rousseau, 1998: 14).

Rousseau's “solution” is that of what he calls “the social contract” (1998: 14) which entails “the total alienation” of “all” the “rights” of each individual “to the whole community” (1998: 15). As this alienation is equal on all sides:

[E]ach gives himself to nobody; and as there is not one associate over whom we do not acquire the same rights which we concede to him over ourselves, we gain the equivalent of what we lose, and more power to preserve what we have (Rousseau, 1998: 15).

In short, this means that “[e]ach of us puts in common his person and his whole power under the supreme direction of the general will” (Rousseau, 1998: 15) which is brought into being by this association. “The citizens being all equal by the social contract, all can prescribe what all ought to do, while no one has a right to demand that another should do what he will not do himself” (Rousseau, 1998: 99). As such, Rousseau supposedly “shows how we can live in the chains of society without compromising our freedom” (Matravers, 1998: ix).

**** Rousseau is justly well known as the champion of natural man. However, he does not believe that we can go back to a state of nature, feeling that society cannot be unmade. What he wants to do is reform it (Copleston, 2003: 70).

The Nature of the General Will

For Rousseau, the general will is moral and infallible, as will be examined in more detail below. Here it is to be noted that the general will is not the only will within a polity. Rousseau affirms (1998: 18) that “every individual may, as a man, have a particular will contrary to, or divergent from, the general will which he has as a citizen.” Indeed, Rousseau sees the individual as being in perpetual conflict with the general will (1998: 86), and it is “the seduction of private interests” that lead people away from the general will (1998: 39). Thus, the contrast between particular will and the general will is that with the former, a person is misled from his real interest. Rousseau states (1998: 39) that “[o]f themselves, the people always desire what is good, but do not always discern it” but that their true desire ensures that “[t]he general will is always right.” In other words, as Copleston summarizes it, the general will “represents what every member of the society ‘really’ wills” (2003: 73).

Nonetheless, the general will is not, for Rousseau, a simple conglomeration of individual wills. Such an agglomeration would simply create a larger misled individual will. MacIntyre notes (2002: 180-1) that for Rousseau, “a genuine common will” which is “the general will” is not to be equated with “the will of all”, which is “the sum, as it were, of individual wills.” The key difference between the general will and the will of all is its focus. For Rousseau, in a state in which “the general will...prevail[s]”, it is the case that “public affairs outweigh private ones in the minds of the citizens” (1998: 95). Hence, Russell notes (2004: 634) that “[t]he general will is not identical with the will of the majority, or even with the will of the citizens. It seems to be conceived as the will belonging to the body politic as such.” And Copleston states:

Of course, if one speaks at all about a quasi-mystical general will of the State, which stands in need of articulate expression, one will inevitably tend to identify it with the expressed decision of the legislator or with the expressed will of some supposed mouthpiece of the people. And this tendency is certainly present in Rousseau. It could hardly be otherwise, given his premises. But it is no more than a tendency; it is not a position he formally adopts. He explicitly allows for instance, that an actual decision of the sovereign legislature may fail to be a true expression of the general will. It may be the expression of private interests which for some reason or other have wrongly prevailed (2003: 72-3).

By not identifying the general will with the will of all, Rousseau escapes the absurdity of regarding majority voting, which is notoriously inconsistent, as providing infallible results. He also allows for the will of the majority to be appraisable as unjust (Copleston, 2003: 73). Rousseau himself states, in his *The Discourse on Political Economy*, that, of a vote in an assembly, “it is by no means certain that its decisions would be the expression of the general will” (qtd. Copleston, 2003: 72). Nevertheless, this leaves the problem of being able to identify when and how the general will is expressed.

Russell justly avers that when “faced with the difficulty of deciding what are the visible manifestations of this will...Rousseau leaves us in the dark” (2004: 634). Copleston makes the observation that if it is presumed the general will is infallible:

[A]nd if we distinguish between this will and the will of all considered as the sum of particular wills...we run the risk of being reduced to an utterance of a tautology. For if we say that the general will is always right, and if we mean by this that the general will is always directed to the common good, the question arises whether we are saying anything more than the will for the common good is the will for the common good (2003: 87).

Without being able to see the general will in practice, it is impossible to evaluate the claim that it is always good. The claim, to be valid, must be open to falsifiability. The concept can have nothing more than a metaphysical meaning if it is argued that when a

society does something immoral that is the result of the sum of their wills, and when it does something moral it is acting according to the general will, if the basis upon which that society acts is the same in both cases. Moreover, as the concepts of morality are, for Rousseau, tied to the general will, without any clear verifiable manner of understanding when the general will is being operative, nothing meaningful results from it. It leads only to the circular argument that, in order to decide that something is morally good, it must be in conformity with the general will, and to decide that something is conformity with the general will, it must be morally good.

There is one concrete element to the general will in Rousseau's writings though, and this concrete element must be made use of if the general will is to have any real meaning at all. Despite the aforementioned points concerning the will of all, Rousseau in fact makes clear in *The Social Contract* that the general will is manifested in legislative action (1998: 91,97)^{****}. This enables Russell to explain the general will in the following manner:

The conception in Rousseau's mind seems to be this: every man's political opinion is governed by self-interest, but self-interest consists of two parts, one of which is peculiar to the individual, while the other is common to all the members of the community. If the citizens have no opportunity of striking logrolling bargains with each other, their individual interests, being divergent, will cancel out, and there will be left a resultant which will represent their common interest; this resultant is the general will (Russell, 2004: 634).

He also adds that:

To say that the general will is always right is only to say that, since it represents what is in common among the self-interest of the various citizens, it must represent the largest collective satisfaction of self-interest possible to the community. This interpretation of Rousseau's meaning seems to accord with his words better than any other that I have been able to think of (2004: 635).

Copleston would concur with Russell on this outlook (2003: 90). Thus, it is legitimate to regard majority legislative action as manifesting the general will when it deals with the common interest, and this allows the concept of the general will to be analysed in practice.

The analysis in this work is done through Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*. As the play does not deal with the functioning of an assembly, the general will, for the purpose of this analysis, will be regarded as the manifestation of the community's concern for its common interest. This is in line with Rousseau's assertion that "the general will alone can direct the forces of the state according to the object of its institution, which is *the common good*" (Rousseau, 1998: 25). Moreover, the most important element of common interest is the survival of the polity itself. Rousseau avers (1998: 31) that "the state or city is nothing but a moral person...and...the most important of its cares is self-preservation" as well as stating "[w]hat is the object of political association? It is the preservation and prosperity of its members" (1998: 84). That this aim cannot be separated from the general will is further evidenced by Rousseau who states that when "it is clear that the primary intention of the people is that the state should not perish" then "[i]n such a case the general will is not doubtful" (1998: 124).

^{****} That no clear division can be made between the "will of all" and the "general will" is a problem owing to Rousseau's ambiguous writing. Copleston states that Rousseau has "left in obscurity the precise nature of the general will" (2003: 88).

Suitability of the Argument

Before examining how the general will functions in the play, it is first necessary to see whether it is the environment created by the play is one in which the general will can operate.

Rousseau has come in for a great deal of criticism concerning his concept of the general will. He has been regarded as the spiritual father of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century (Russell, 2004: 635-6). Nevertheless, Rousseau himself states (1998: 93) that “[t]he abuses of great states cannot be brought as an objection against a man who desires small ones”, and Rousseau clearly feels the general will is best expressed in a city-state, similar in size to the polis of ancient Greece. The reason for this is that for the “authentic acts” of the general will to be expressed, it must be the case that “the people are assembled” (Rousseau, 1998: 91). That is that the whole of the citizenry should be able to come together as the sovereign power, which is far easier in a city-state, and for which the aforementioned historical model provides an example. This is why Rousseau explicitly states that the “proper limits” of a state are those of a city-state (1998: 93).

The town in *An Enemy of the People* is not a *de jure* city-state. The stage directions for the play describe the setting as “a seaside town in southern Norway” (Ibsen, 1964: 104). For instance, there is clearly a “Government”^{*****} over and above the locally based authorities of the town. Nonetheless, at no point does this higher political authority interfere in, or influence the action of the play in any manner. All of the political decisions made in the play are made locally in the town for local concerns, and the concept of civic concern and citizenship is left at the level of the town^{*****}. Hence, the town, for the purposes of the play, is a *de facto* city-state, and as such amenable for an analysis of Rousseau’s general will.

The other aspect of the town that enables it to be open for an analysis of the general will is that it is a “free” society (Ibsen, 1964: 147). Granted, the town does not function through an assembly made up of all of its citizens, and Rousseau sees the use of freely-elected representatives, such as those who sit on the town council (Ibsen, 1964: 116), as alienating the general will (Rousseau, 1998: 96). Nevertheless, in the core issue of the play – the question of the Baths – the populace manifest their opinion openly and freely as if an assembly were in session. Thus, the play can be used for an analysis of the general will.

The Analysis Itself

In *An Enemy of the People*, Dr Stockmann’s desire to publish his findings into the polluted waters of the Baths, and his later refusal to recant or severely modify them has to be viewed as his acting in defiance of the general will. This is because the general will, as has already been noted, concerns “the common good” which is “the preservation and prosperity” of the members of the polity.

In Ibsen’s play, the importance of the Baths to the preservation of the town as it is in its current level of prosperity is clearly evident. Right at the beginning of the play, the Mayor makes clear how important the Baths are to the town. He refers to them as being “a great common interest” that “unite” everyone, and that they are “an interest which is of equal concern to every right-minded citizen” (Ibsen, 1964: 107). The Baths are regarded in the town as its “pulsating heart” and its “main artery” and “chief nerve centre” (Ibsen,

^{*****} See for instance: Ibsen, 1964: 142, 155, 156

^{*****} See for instance: Ibsen, 1964: 142, 146, 153, 180, 182

1964: 121). The benefits that the Baths have brought are enumerated by the Mayor as representative of the advantages as being that “[m]oney has been pouring in; there’s life and movement everywhere; and land and house-property values are rising every day” (Ibsen, 1964: 108). His class are also pleased with “a most welcome reduction in the Poor Rate” (Ibid). For the petit bourgeoisie, it is Aslaksen, who symbolizes the majority (Ibsen, 1964: 163), who explains that “[t]he Baths look like being a little gold mine, as it were, to the town. The Baths will represent the livelihood of all of us – and of us householders most of all” (Ibsen, 1964: 133). Moreover, it is expected that the Baths will generate even greater revenues that year (Ibsen, 1964: 108). It is likely the case that the Baths are what has led to the “temporary truce” between the Mayor and the newspaper (Ibsen, 1964: 115).

By threatening to stab this “pulsating heart” with his findings carried out in the university that confirm his suspicions of unclean waters in the Baths (Ibsen, 1964: 122), Dr Stockmann poses a serious threat to the town’s common good and its continuing existence as it is. With Dr Stockmann’s findings, the Baths are then to be regarded as “a poisoned white sepulchre” (Ibsen, 1964: 121). It is the case that Dr Stockmann’s findings are at first welcomed by Aslaksen speaking for the majority (Ibsen, 1964: 132,135), and the radical newspapermen (Ibsen 124), but this is only because they view his findings as being a problem for only a section of their society and have not understood their implications. They feel that it is the governing elite that must sort out the problem (Ibsen, 1964: 131,133). When however, the Mayor makes it clear to them that the financial responsibilities – totalling “some two hundred thousand kroner” (Ibsen, 1964: 164) – for sorting out the problem will be shared by all the townspeople, and moreover, the Baths will have to be closed “for at least two years” (Ibid) whilst repairs are made, Aslaksen suddenly regards the situation “in quite a different light” (Ibid), as do the radical newspapermen (Ibsen 164, 170). Indeed, it is the case that the “public opinion” of the town (Ibsen, 1964: 172) – that is the town as a whole – comes together to reject the findings and silence Dr Stockmann (Ibsen, 1964: 181). Thus, the general will as manifested in *An Enemy of the People* is opposed to Dr Stockmann’s findings, and this leads to uncomfortable implications which will be examined next.

Morality

A moral evaluation of the action of the town towards the covering up of the truth of the polluted waters and in its attempted silencing of Dr Stockmann is problematic in Rousseau’s philosophy. His writings can be read to endorse both moral relativism and moral absolutism. Nevertheless, as this work is analysing Rousseau’s general will through *An Enemy of the People*, it is the moral relativism incumbent on the general will that is made evident. In *The Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau states that:

The general will, which always tends to the preservation and welfare of the whole and of every part, and which is the source of the laws, constitutes for all the members of the State, in their relations to one another and to it, the rule of what is just and unjust (qtd. in Copleston, 2003: 70-1)*****.

As the opponents of Dr Stockmann have acted in accordance with what Copleston describes as “the infallible general will” (2003: 79), in Rousseau’s outlook, their actions

***** To clarify the meaning of this passage as endorsing moral relativism, Copleston adds:

It is idle, for instance, to say that Spartan children were morally guilty of theft when they stole to supplement their meagre repasts. For they were acting in accordance with the general will of the Spartan State. And this was for them the measure of just and unjust, right and wrong (2003: 71).

must therefore be just and moral, rather than as pragmatic and selfish as they would appear to both Ibsen and the average reader of the play. Indeed, for Rousseau, the general will is by its very nature moral. As Judith Shklar has pointed out, the general will is “a transposition of the most essential individual moral faculty” which as seen above is the individual will “to the realm of public experience” (qtd. in Riley, 2001b: 124). By being concerned with the welfare of all within the state, “the general will is always the most just also, and that the voice of the people is in fact the voice of God” (qtd. Copleston, 2003: 71). Moreover, if the general will is moral in this case, then Dr Stockmann, in seeking to reveal the truth about the deleterious waters of the baths, and thus to prevent further cases of visitors sickening with serious illness from these waters, actually acts amorally or immorally. This is the case as Copleston notes that under the general will, “*moral goodness* involves identification of one’s particular will with the general will” (Ibid). Rousseau clearly states that “virtue is nothing more than [the] conformity of the particular wills with the general will” (qtd. Copleston, 2003: 72), and Dr Stockmann refuses to conform his will to the generality, thus he cannot be regarded as a virtuous individual.

As such, it appears that Rousseau wishes to redefine morality, similarly to Thrasymachus’ claim in *The Republic* of Plato that “justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger” (Plato, 2007: 194) – the stronger being those who embody the majority or the general will. This would also mean that he favours a strict form of utilitarianism. However, the implications of Rousseau’s general will do not square with his wider writings on ethics, providing yet another instance of Rousseau’s ambiguity. By presaging morality on the general will, moral relativism necessarily ensues, and yet Rousseau rejects moral relativism, regardless of the aforementioned quotation. He explicitly puts himself in opposition to Thrasymachus’ claim by exclaiming that “might does not make right” (Rousseau, 1998: 8). Moreover, Rousseau’s wider writings reveal a thinker who has a traditional absolutist notion of morality. For instance, he believes that justice has a divine source, exclaiming “all justice comes from God” (Rousseau, 1998: 37) and also that “[w]ithout doubt there is a universal justice emanating from reason alone” (Ibid). Moreover, he accepts the existence of “the laws of virtue” (Rousseau, 1996: 252-3) as understood by the society of his time; that is absolutist ethics based on ancient and Christian mores. That he has such an outlook is clear from the character of the Savoyard Vicar in his novel *Emile*, who avers that “there is...at the bottom of our hearts an innate principle of justice and virtue by which, in spite of our maxims, we judge our own actions or those of others to be good or evil; and it is this principle which I call conscience” (qtd. in Copleston: 78)*****. Other examples of Rousseau’s acceptance of traditional absolutist morality can be seen in his own explicit reference to a “conscience” that remains alert to wrongdoing (Rousseau, 1996: 82), in addition to his lauding the “natural pity” he believes belongs to natural man (Rousseau, 1984: 100). For specific instances of a traditional ethical outlook, Rousseau condemns “the greedy pursuit of gain” (Rousseau, 1998: 95) as well as his self-condemnation of having falsely accused another of theft (Rousseau, 1996: 80-83)*****.

Hence, it is the case, as the analysis of *An Enemy of the People* makes clear, that Rousseau’s placing of the concept of the general will at the centre of his political philosophy leads to results in ethical terms that Rousseau would not approve of.

***** The Savoyard Vicar is to be seen here as voicing of Rousseau’s own sincerely-held ideas (Copleston, 2003: 78).

***** Indeed, Rousseau claims that “the desire of freeing” himself “in some degree” from the remorse of this action decades later played a significant role in his decision to write *The Confessions* (1996: 82).

Freedom

The second problem with Rousseau's general will exposed by Ibsen's play involves the concept of freedom. The personal importance of freedom to Rousseau should not be underestimated. Rousseau exclaims (1996: 35) that "I worship freedom; I abhor restraint, trouble, dependence" and he reveals how being free enables him to function as a better man by stating "I become so easily accustomed to any manner of life, *when it is voluntary*" (1996: 250). In fact, freedom is central to human value, as has already been noted above in a quotation from *The Social Contract*. Elsewhere, Rousseau makes the same point, stating:

Nature commands all animals, and the beast obeys. Man receives the same impulsion, but he recognizes himself as being free to acquiesce or resist; and it is above all in this consciousness of his freedom that the spirituality of the soul reveals itself (Rousseau, 1984: 88).

Thus, Rousseau has been evaluated by Hampshire-Monk (1992: 156) as having "freedom" as his "central preoccupation" with "his greatest fear" being "dependency", and by Mark Hulliung as being a thinker "unrelenting in his quest for furthering human autonomy" (2001: 58). It is therefore seemingly evident that Rousseau places great importance on freedom, and he regards it, in its traditional sense, as being the opposite of constraint. Consequently, it would appear that in the philosophy of Rousseau, the actions of Dr Stockmann in thinking for himself, and reaching his own conclusions, and his desire to voice his opinions openly would be endorsed. This is especially the case, when considering Rousseau's statement of "how can a man be free and yet forced to conform to wills which are not his own" (1998: 108). Indeed, this would seem to support Dr Stockmann in resisting the pressure of the town to silence him.

However, with the concept of the general will this is not in fact the case, as with this concept Dr Stockmann is not actually being free when he sets himself up against the town. The town, on the whole, wishes to silence Dr Stockmann and force him to recant his findings, and in Rousseau's philosophy they are right. As Rousseau notes:

[W]hen...the opinion opposed to my own prevails, that simply shows I was mistaken, and that what I considered to be the general will was not so. Had my private opinion prevailed, I should have done something other than I wished; and in that case *I should not have been free* (1998: 109).

So, rather than, in the generally accepted sense of liberty, Dr Stockmann manifesting his freedom by refusing to submit to the will of the majority, in Rousseau's understanding of freedom, Dr Stockmann is not being free by doing so. Indeed, such action, in Rousseau's view, selfishly endangers the very state. Being a thinker who avers that "it is only the power of the state that secures the freedom of its members" (Rousseau, 1998: 54), Rousseau explains:

[E]very individual may, as a man, have a particular will contrary to, or divergent from, the general will which he has as a citizen; his private interest may prompt him quite differently from the common interest...and regarding the moral person that constitutes the state as an imaginary being because it is not a man, he would be willing to enjoy the rights of a citizen without being willing to fulfil the duties of a subject. The progress of such injustice would bring about the ruin of the body politic (1998: 18).

This then leads to Rousseau's most infamous remark concerning liberty. It is that "whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free" (Rousseau, 1998: 18), by realigning his will with the general will as a component part of it. Hence, Dr Stockmann is not only failing to be free in regarding his findings concerning the baths as valid and refusing to recant them, he *should* in fact be forced to change his opinion and express this

change publically in order to be free. That is, the Mayor, the majority of the town and the radical newspapermen are actually attempting to help Dr Stockmann to be free. Rousseau is therefore not an advocate of what he calls “conventional liberty” (Rousseau, 1998: 15), but rather redefines the term “liberty” to mean something rather different.

This redefinition has led to criticism of Rousseau. Copleston notes (2003: 92) that “the very fact that the position” of forcing somebody to be free “immediately strikes one as paradoxical suggests that the word free is being given in a sense which, whatever it may be is different from the sense or senses it normally bears”, whereas Dr Stockmann in regarding the suppressive “solid majority” as an “enemy...of freedom” (Ibsen, 1964: 184) uses it in the conventional one. Russell, for instance, only believes that “[l]iberty is the nominal goal of Rousseau’s thought” as he feels that “in fact it is equality that [Rousseau] values, and that he seeks to secure even at the expense of liberty” (Russell, 2004: 632). Indeed, for Russell, *The Social Contract* containing Rousseau’s redefined liberty “implies a complete abrogation of liberty and a complete rejection of the doctrines of the rights of man” (Ibid). As such, it opens the way for “collective tyranny” (Ibid), and as such “[i]ts doctrines, though they pay lip-service to democracy, tend to the justification of the totalitarian state” (Russell, 2004: 631). Copleston would disagree, viewing Rousseau as no “friend of despotism or tyranny or terror” (2003: 92), but he still feels that “[i]t is difficult to see how the fact that an opinion different from my own prevails by majority vote ‘proves’ that I was mistaken” and faults Rousseau for the fact he “simply assumes that it does” (Copleston, 2003: 91). Russell argues that the “conception of being ‘forced to be free’ is very metaphysical” (2004: 633) and feels that with this doctrine, “Rousseau forgets his romanticism and speaks like a sophisticated policeman” (Ibid). The analysis of Rousseau’s concept of the general will through Ibsen’s play confirms Russell’s opinion, as it ironically justifies the attempted suppressing of Dr Stockmann as being an attempt to liberate him. It also makes the statement of Riley that “[h]ad Rousseau not been centrally concerned with freedom – above all with the voluntariness of human actions – he would never have made ‘the general will’ the core idea of his political philosophy” especially ironic (2001b: 148).

Relation with other Politics

A further problem with the general will that is raised by Ibsen’s play is that of the external relations of the state. It has already been stated in this work that Rousseau belongs to the economic or social contract tradition. The aim of the outlooks represented in this tradition, by finding the correct relationship between authority and liberty, is to ensure societal peace. And, if the town is successful in silencing Dr Stockmann, Rousseau’s general will could be said to achieve this aim at least. Nevertheless, Immanuel Kant recognized a serious flaw in the economic and social contract tradition in its limiting its scope to the state itself and not to external conditions. Kant notes (1949: 441-442) that the condition of “wild freedom” still exists in the arena of international affairs, and as such “[n]ations may be considered like individual men which hurt each other in the state of nature, when they are not subject to laws, by their very propinquity.” And as peoples are threatened just as much by external aggression as they are by internal oppression or instability, any political theory that ensures peace within the state but not between the states has left its aim unfulfilled (Kersting, 1999: 362). A social contract of some kind therefore needs to be

drawn up between states as well as within them for their citizenries^{*****}, and only in such a manner can “wilfulness and violence” be “banished from human social relations” (Ibid).

Yet, the general will, despite the all-encompassing sound of the name, is in fact limited to that of an individual state. As Riley states (2001b: 134), for Rousseau, “[t]he notion of ‘generality’” is one that “occup[ies] a place midway between *particularity* and *universality*.” This means that Rousseau has “drawn the dividing line between *généralité* and *universalité*, between the *polis* and the *cosmopolis*” (Riley, 2001b: 135). In other words, the general will is only relevant within individual states. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau does not enter into the question of “external relations” of states, as it “forms a new subject too vast for [his] limited scope” (Rousseau, 1998: 139), and as such he only deals with international security by countering the potential objection of “how can small states be endowed with sufficient force to resist great ones” by declaiming “[j]ust in the same way as when the Greek towns of old resisted the Great King, and as more recently Holland and Switzerland have resisted the House of Austria” (Rousseau, 1998: 93). This aside from being extremely ill-thought out^{*****} is clearly unsatisfactory as it still entails a state of war.

The problem of continuous instability being created by localized general wills can be inferred from *An Enemy of the People*. At the end of the play, it is unclear whether the true conditions of the baths will be kept a secret. Dr Stockmann has vowed “to write to papers in other towns” promising “[t]he whole country will know how things stand here” (Ibsen, 2003: 191) and there has certainly been enough local scandal to cause the price of shares in the baths to fall dramatically, suggesting that the whole affair may not be able to be hushed up (Ibsen, 1964: 208, 212-3). But for the purpose of this analysis these points are unimportant. What is important is that the general will *desired* the silencing of the truth about the baths, and if it could have had its way this silence would have been ensured.

The implication of such a silencing therefore needs to be examined. Assuming that the truth about the baths could be hushed up, visitors from outside of the town would continue to come to the town and ruin their health. In the end, suspicion would fall on the town in other towns – which can also be thought of as polises with general wills of their own – around the country, and this could lead to reciprocal consequences, such as a boycott of the town or a refusal to have economic relations with it. It could even lead to the other polises demanding, through the central state authority, that the town be visited with punitive action. In other words, the continuing stability of the town would not be

^{*****} Kant states that:

For states in their relation to each other there cannot, according to reason, be any other way to get away from the lawless state that contains nothing but war than to give up (just like individual men) their wild and lawless freedom, to accept public and enforceable laws, and thus to form a constantly growing world state of all nations (*civitasgenitum*) which finally would comprise all nations (Kant, 1949 445).

^{*****} There are numerous problems with Rousseau's two examples. Firstly, they both deal with empires that are fighting at a great distance from their heartlands. Secondly, in the case of the Dutch, they were receiving material support from two other full-sized nations, France and England. But the most glaring problem is that history, as Rousseau should be well aware, provides plentiful incidences of city-states being overwhelmed by greater-sized ones. There was the case of the Phoenician city-states falling to Assyria, the Greek ones being brought under Macedonian and later Roman control, and in more modern times, the unfortunate situation in Italy, which is analyzed by Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1979: 128-9) and which Machiavelli wants, in vain, to reverse (1979: 133-8). Moreover, Rousseau's contemporaries would not have shared his historical optimism. The primary reason for the newly created states in the Americas to not only continue with their wartime union, but actually strengthen it, was that it “affords them the best security that can be devised against *hostilities* from abroad” (Hamilton, 1961: 42).

ensured by silencing this truth, and the general will would not be acting in the public interest if external relations are taken into account. Hence, by promoting a general will that is geographically limited to the boundaries of a city-state, Rousseau does not ensure peace and stability for its members. It is to be noted though, that as with his views on morality and liberty, Rousseau does not hold a clearly unambiguous position regarding the limitation of the general will to the borders state. Copleston notes that:

As far as the *Discourse on Political Economy* is concerned, Rousseau evidently assumes that there is something higher than the State. We have seen that, according to him, the more general will is also the most just. We can say, therefore, that just as the wills of individuals and of particular societies within the State are particular wills in relation to the general will of the State, so is the will of an individual State a particular will if it is looked at in relation 'to the great city of the world...whose general will is always the will of nature, and of which the different States and peoples are individual members' (2003: 73).

Dr Stockmann's Remarks on the Minority

There is a final point about the general will that is raised by Ibsen's play that is worthy of examination. It is revealed in Dr Stockmann's identification of "the most dangerous enemy of truth" as being that of "the solid majority" (Ibsen, 1964: 184). In contrast, those "who've absorbed all the new, vigorous truths" and who "stand at the outposts, as it were" (Ibsen, 1964: 185), these people are "fighting for truths so newly-born in the world of thought as to have only the few on their side" (Ibsen, 1964: 186). The author is reflected in his creation here, with Ibsen's own outlook being described as one of "aristocratic idealism" (Brustein, 1991: 72), and soon after the publication of *Ghosts*, in a letter to Georg Brandes, Ibsen wrote that "[t]he minority is always right – that is to say, the minority that is leading the way towards some point at which the majority has not yet arrived"***** (qtd. in Watts, 1964: 12).

The general will with its duty to compel uniformity can therefore be regarded as an obstacle to the discovery of new truths, and intellectual progress. As a historical instance, Russell rhetorically asks whether Galileo was "'forced to be free' when the Inquisition compelled him to recant" considering that "[t]he general will in the time of Galileo was certainly anti-Copernican" (Russell, 2004: 633). Nevertheless, this would perhaps endear the concept of the general will even more to Rousseau, as he himself was an enemy of progress. The prevention of new ideas could be viewed by Rousseau as a benefit of the general will. Nonetheless, this would also mean that Rousseau ought to have welcomed the burning of his books in Geneva in 1762 rather than seeing it as an infringement of "common sense" (Rousseau, 1996: 578).

***** Shaw supports Ibsen in this outlook by affirming that:

It is a scientific fact that the majority, however eager it may be for the reform of old abuses, is always wrong in its opinion of new developments, or rather is always unfit for them (for it can hardly be said to be wrong in opposing developments for which it is not yet fit). The pioneer is a tiny minority of the force he heads; and so, though it is easy to be in a minority and yet be wrong, it is absolutely impossible to be in the majority and yet be right as to the newest social prospects (Shaw, 1891: 94).

Conclusion

This work has demonstrated that, by applying Rousseau's concept of the general will, in the only meaningful way this concept can be applied, to the events of the *de facto* fictional city-state in Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*, a concept that supposedly determines ethics, liberty and societal peace can in fact be viewed as being in opposition to them all. At least that is the case for ethics and liberty unless these terms are radically redefined, and redefined in a way that seems to be at odds to Rousseau's wider writings. The contrast between ethics and liberty as understood in light of the general will, and their use elsewhere is perhaps unsurprising as Rousseau's overall work is notoriously ambiguous or contradictory. This work provides evidence to the claim that Rousseau is "the author of paradoxes" (Riley, 2001a: 1), and that "many of Rousseau's central moral-political beliefs are cast in the form of paradoxes" (Riley, 2001b: 134). It supports the view that "virtue meant a number of contrary things to Rousseau" (Kelly, 2001: 11), and that the idea of forcing somebody to be free is a "paradox" in itself (Copleston, 2003: 91); indeed, it is "Rousseau's famous" one (Ibid). Rousseau as a paradoxical thinker also explains how such differing opinions about him have been held. As Roger D Masters points out, Rousseau "[f]or twentieth century critics...is often praised as the founder of the western democratic tradition or vilified as a forerunner of totalitarianism" (qtd. in Riley, 2001a: 7).

What would be the greatest paradox of all in regard to this work is that Rousseau and Ibsen or his alter-ego Dr Stockmann actually reach such differing conclusions from such similar standpoints. Much like Ibsen after having written *Ghosts*, Rousseau regarded himself as a misunderstood individual, and one who has been the "victim" of "treachery and falsehood" (Rousseau's *Confessions* own fn. to 279). He too expressed a minority view by rejecting the traditional theology as well as the progressive rational views of the Enlightenment. And at times in his life, such as the aforementioned book burning when, as he puts it, "a 'cry of execration...went up against [him] throughout Europe" (Rousseau, 1996: 578) and the period following the publication of his anti-Christian *Letters Written from the Mountain*, he was regarded as much "a Public Enemy" as Doctor Stockmann with his challenging writings*****.

Philosophically, however, in a certain sense both Rousseau and Ibsen-Dr Stockmann are attracted more by grandiose positions than by solid reasoning. When Dr Stockmann claims "[t]he majority never has right on its side" (Ibsen, 1964: 185) and when Rousseau regards the general will as being infallible, they take up extreme opposing outlooks. But it is surely the case that morality, freedom, justice and truth, if they are to escape from the most banal relativism, cannot be determined by the size of the societal section that favours them, whether smaller or larger, and require founding on a basis more profound than simple computations of their adherents.

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***** See Riley, 2001a: 6

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